

Library making changes to meet needs of LGBTQ+ patrons



By Brock Weir

Aurorans rarely think twice about picking up the phone and asking for the information we need.

Sure, the days of calling 411 to ask for that all-important number seems a bit old fashioned these days, but sometimes a call is the quickest way to achieve results.

For others, however, picking up the phone can sometimes seem like a daunting task, particularly if you're looking for help from others.

A few weeks ago, the Aurora Public Library received a phone call from one such person.

The question had been on the mind of the Library patron for quite some time but until they took the first step of sitting in on a focus group the Library recently held for LGBTQ+ youth, they didn't feel comfortable taking that first step.

‘One of the teens called to ask a question and identified as having attended the youth focus group and said there was a safe feeling and now they were comfortable to call and ask this question,’ says Reccia Mandelcorn of the APL.

For her, it was a sure sign that recent focus groups for LGBTQ+ adult and teens was a resounding success.

The APL launched its new strategic plan back in January with a focus on listening to the community on how they wanted the Library to support their needs, while encouraging the community to develop programs and shape the Library services they feel will help them grow.

As part of the plan they identified different groups where there might be some room for improvement on how the Library meets their needs, and one such group was the LGBTQ community. Brainstorming behind the scenes looked at ways they could engage the LGBTQ population and this past spring they held two focus groups – one for adults and one for teens.

‘Some of us identify as LGBTQ and many of us have friends and family and we just didn't see the Library as really responding to them,’ says Ms. Mandelcorn. ‘Everyone in the community has certain needs from the Library; everyone wants information, everyone wants recreation, and everybody wants community, but you also want to have the Library reflect who you are, and you want to see your reflection in Library staff and in our programming. We weren't showing that and we really felt we had to make a proper connection with this part of the community.’

Sitting down with the two demographic groups, the Library found that both age brackets identified the same general needs. They wanted Library collections and knowledge, but Ms. Mandelcorn says they also want more.

‘They wanted to know that this was a safe space,’ she says. ‘They wanted to know that, as having a place on the gender spectrum, they were welcome here and the staff were open to them, that they could come in and ask for specific information and not feel uncomfortable; that they could go into a washroom and not feel uncomfortable; that they could easily find material on LGBTQ information and not feel awkward asking for it.’

They also said they wanted the Library to support them as ‘community members’ including participating in the recent York Pride Parade.

‘I was very thankful that they said our staff all show them respect when they come in and they don't feel uncomfortable, but they did

say they wanted to know that there is training for staff in making sure this is a safe space," says Ms. Mandelcorn.

That being said, however, there were some marked differences in feedback received from youth and adults.

Teens said they were looking for more information, including information from health and legal perspectives, including how to get married and having children. Traditional requests, to be sure, but they also called for support, including meeting spaces.

"They were really more information-based because they are still finding their identity," says Ms. Mandelcorn. "But the adults were saying, "We don't want to go into Toronto for bars. We want to be able to go into our community and have a games night; we would like to see a festival of Pride films around the time of Pride; guest speakers to make Pride a really big event over June."

Some of the requests were indeed traditional, but then again some were not. Some teens were looking for a program on safe sex, which Ms. Mandelcorn says was not on their radar and "may not be our role at all." She admits that they can't deliver on everything that was requested, but they are doing their best.

In fact, some of their requests were already in the works before the focus groups, including the Library's first designated gender neutral washroom, which is now on the second floor.

A new collections manager is now looking at how to bring existing library collections together to make them a "little bit more identifiable" for people looking for LGBTQ content.

Teens in the focus group initially asked for labels to be put on the book spines so content could be easily found, but facilitators made sure to ask them if this was what they really wanted as bringing home a book labelled in this manner might make things uncomfortable if you were not out to your family.

With this in mind, the teens asked for a tag in the computer system so they could seek out the material on their own.

"There were a lot of things that are very easy for us to do," says Ms. Mandelcorn. "It takes a little bit of time to move on it, but they were thoughtful and important. I think they bring us the ability to engage and treat every member of our community with respect.

The focus groups gave us such concrete feedback and ideas and direction. Can we do everything? No. Can we do some of the things? We have already done some. Do we have the will to do them? Absolutely."